



Exploring the interior spaces of music

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ABSTRACT

This article explores interiority as a spatial phenomenon in relation to music and spatial experience. While physical spaces are accessible to many, interiority remains a uniquely personal domain; it can also contain an intangible yet real experience of space. This interior landscape exhibits characteristics of physical space: it can be vast or enclosed, illuminated or dark, in constant movement or still. While interiority has been examined across disciplines, its explicitly spatial dimensions receive little attention in contemporary academic discourse. Focusing on the spatial perception of a musical interval, this study employs an experimental-experiential methodology to document the researcher's engagement with inner spatial phenomena. Doing this requires deprivatising personal experiences, challenging and disobeying conventional academic paradigms that prioritise external, material phenomena. The article proposes that spatial experience forms a continuum linking bodily, aesthetic and supersensible dimensions of perception. Recognising this continuum invites more porous borders between disciplines and a re-examination of the epistemic conventions that separate art, consciousness and the study of space. By acknowledging interiority as a legitimate site of inquiry, it points toward a broader understanding of a continuum of perception, extending from sensory awareness to supersensible experience and questions the boundaries of what can be known.

1. Introduction

In considering the multiplicity of spatial environments open to human experience, I concentrate in this article on the experience of interior space, interiority, its creation, maintenance and adoption as a site of research. I refer to interiority not just as the inner nature of the self, but as a location in which spatial and affective phenomena can be experienced in different yet comparable ways to physical space. Unlike material spaces and environments which can be visited by many, interior space is completely private, a location which is personal in its deepest sense.

In turning to the question of spatial experience and spatial phenomena, I draw on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of primordial spatiality (1945/2013) as the qualitative, experiential way in which the body inhabits the world – the body's practical encounter with it. In an everyday sense, this arises not only through movement within external environments but also through the realisation that space is not an abstract expanse outside of the subject which can be measured, but rather that is lived and felt, something which is encountered by being within it.

My experience of the phenomena that arise within interior space does not contradict these understandings but continues them. The phenomena of inner space, too, are lived, inhabited and given direction through embodied awareness. Just as one can approach a building or a house, or walk through a landscape in the physical world, one can feel oneself approaching an inner phenomenon in not dissimilar ways, sensing a shift in nearness and direction, eventually walking through a portal and 'entering' it. I understand these experiences to be part of the same continuous field of embodiment and spatial relationships that connects the body and the world – both the inner and the outer world. Just like physical environments, these interior spaces are not experienced as emotionally neutral. They each possess distinctive emotional qualities ranging from expectancy and curiosity to profound peace. Emotion is an inseparable part of how such spaces are perceived and navigated, rather than existing separately from them.

While Merleau-Ponty's account of spatiality emphasises shared, everyday embodied experience, the interior spatiality explored here falls outside what is ordinarily experienced. However, such experience is not understood as restricted to particular individuals but as a set of latent

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capacities, unevenly developed and dependent on the cultivation of attention (Varela et al., 2016; Zajonc, 2009). In this sense, the study extends Merleau-Ponty's account toward less familiar, but still embodied, forms of spatial experience.

This reciprocity between outer and inner spatiality finds direct expression in lived experience. In contemplative awareness, space seems to fold inward upon itself even as it simultaneously expands immensely outward. The more deeply one turns inward, the more spacious and unbounded the field of awareness becomes. The mind is no longer in space but, in a certain sense, becomes space.

By its nature, interiority is a soul-space, yet it is experienced in strikingly spatial ways: multi-dimensional, textured and dynamic. It may appear as a domain through which one can move, filled with light and shade, colour and motion, vast expanses and sudden velocity. It can feel like walking an inward path, as if following an actual track leading from one state of consciousness to another. It is what Hammarskjöld calls "the longest journey" (1963/1964, p. 48) of all, a journey that, paradoxically, can be travelled in its entirety while remaining perfectly still.

Impressions of this inner landscape can be shared in words or images, yet never directly experienced by another; they remain accessible only to the perceiving subject. For that subject, however, such spatial phenomena can appear as real, indeed more real, than any physical environment, although apprehended through completely different means. Experiences of this kind have been explored across cultures and centuries and, while they remain relatively uncommon within contemporary geographical discussions of space, interiority itself has long been addressed in several disciplines. Cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience have developed approaches for investigating inner experience, consciousness and mental imagery (Pearson, 2019) while psychoanalytic traditions have long explored questions of interior life, symbolism and the unconscious (Newirth, 2023). Beyond this, phenomenological approaches within cognitive science have sought to develop rigorous first-person accounts of lived experience and consciousness (Varela et al., 2016). The present study extends these concerns in a different direction by examining interiority specifically as a directly experienced spatial phenomenon.

I would like to clarify how I am using the words sound and music in this article. *Sound* refers to the vibration of air, a "wave motion in air or other elastic media ... that results in its perception" (Everest and Pohlmann, 2015, Chapter 1, para. 1). *Music*, on the other hand, I understand to be humanly organised sound. As Blacking (1974) states, "Music is a product of the behaviour of human groups, whether formal or informal: it is humanly organized sound" (p. 10). So, while all music is sound, not all sound is music. Within this framework, I use the term "note" to refer to sound as it is experienced and organised musically, rather than "pitch" which I understand as an abstract or measurable frequency.

This article focuses on two deliberately selected notes presented in relation to one another. Through this intentional choice and the perceived relationship between the tones, they function as music, albeit more as a fundamental musical element poised at the boundary of what music is. In doing this, I make a modest and tentative attempt to explore inner space as a site of research for the experiencing of the spatial qualities of music. Specifically, I concentrate on the spatial experience of a musical interval. The methodology around this is experimental as well as experiential. Documenting it relies on the willingness of the researcher to lay bare aspects of their inner life normally left unshared. However, in the spirit of academic inquiry, I document some aspects here in the hope that it will encourage those who, like Maslow (1971), wish to strengthen the soul component of academic work, and to expand notions of how spatial phenomena are experienced and can be written about.

In writing this article, I draw on my original training and profession. Although I work elsewhere in the academy now, my former occupation was as musician and musicologist.

2. Literature review

Finding ways in which to describe the spatiality of non-physical space has occupied philosophers, artists and mystics for centuries. I review a small sample of the literature here, although this can do no more than indicate directions for further exploration. I also draw on Foucault's work on parrhesia and the ethics of deprivatisation in considering the disclosure of inner experience.

The sources drawn on here are not presented as coming from a continuous or unified tradition. Rather, they are selected from different philosophical and cultural contexts and brought together because of their shared attempts to describe forms of non-physical or interior space.

2.1. Describing non-physical space

In *Timaeus*, Plato (2016) outlines three different realms of reality, of existence, and of experience. The 'lowest' of these (directional references are all-but unavoidable) is that of the everyday, the world of physical objects and of sense perceptions. This world is constantly in change, is impermanent and is subject to time, decay and imperfection. This is the realm in which we experience physical space. There is another realm, for Plato the 'highest', which he terms the realm of Ideas or Forms as expounded in *The republic* (380 BCE/2007). Existing outside time and space, these constitute the ultimate realities through which all knowledge and experience take shape. They are perfect, unchanging and immutable. They include mathematical and moral archetypes, the 'building blocks' of what exists on earth.

'In between' the sense-perceptible and the archetypal is a third realm, which Plato calls *chōra* (χώρα). This term has been variously translated as 'space', 'receptacle' and 'place'. *Chōra* functions as an intermediary realm between the sense-perceptible world and world of Forms. It allows Forms to manifest in the physical world. Like that of the Forms, the territory of *chōra* cannot be found in the material world; like the Forms, it is not 'real' in an earthly sense. It is a zone of interbeing, an intermediary realm in which impressions of the Forms can be perceived.

Plato describes *chōra* using maternal metaphors, comparing it to a mother or to the womb in which a new physical body is created, influenced by non-physical forces. This maternal concept is carried further by Kristeva and other feminist theorists, who write about the creative interzonal location of *chōra* (Bianchi, 2006), as a "womb of creativity" (Merriman et al., 2012, p. 6) suggesting a space set apart where forms come into being. *Chōra* can neither be perceived by the senses nor grasped fully by reason; it can only be approached through what Plato calls "λόγῳ δὲ τινὶ παραλόγῳ" (*Timaeus*, 52a), illogical, absurd, spurious reasoning, or, as Kalkavage puts it, only "graspable by some bastard reasoning" (2016, p. 42). This finds a parallel two millennia later in Deleuze and Guattari's suggestions for the "groping experimentation" of alternative methods, involving "measures which are not very respectable, rational or reasonable ... of dreams, of pathological processes, esoteric experiences, drunkenness, and excess" (1991/1994, p. 41). Yet, significantly, these alternative methods are, for Deleuze and Guattari, the "eyes of the mind" and are necessary to explore what exists beyond the plane of immanence, "an outside more distant than any external world because it is an inside deeper than any internal world" (p. 39).

2.2. Conceptualisations of inner space

Concepts such as these take the reader, or researcher, beyond the bounds of conventional academic inquiry. They describe what exists beyond the apparent boundary of the physical world to what is imperceptible to the everyday senses. In working with these concepts, Corbin says that

what we must begin to destroy, to the extent that we are able to do so, even at the cost of a struggle resumed every day, is what may be

called the “agnostic reflex” in Western man, because he has consented to the divorce between *thought* and *being* (1984/1995, p. 7).

This sentence highlights an important feature of accounts of non-spatial space, that it is something which *is*, and is not just a thought, idea or notion. Such accounts are by authors who have lived the experiences they report. They “must [have] become changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than [themselves]” (Foucault, 1980/2016, p. 15) in order to experience what they do. All these accounts contain within them a paradox, that “the longest journey is a journey inwards” (Hammarskjöld, 1964/1964, p. 48) and that the furthest point we are able to travel to is one which lies most closely to hand. It is a paradox which contrasts what is commonly considered to be vastness of outer space with a complementary image of the similar vastness of inner space, that within the microcosmos of the human being, the entirety of the macrocosmos can be found.

Accounts of territory which exists beyond the boundary of the material can be found in multiple cultures and traditions, including Chinese, Buddhist, Islamic, as well as Classical and contemporary Western sources. The accounts span centuries. While there is clearly a difficulty finding appropriate terminology (Boland, 2024), how internal space is experienced is conveyed through the pictorial language used.

Suhrawardī was one of the foremost representatives of Illuminationism, a school of Persian philosophy which flourished in the twelfth century. Walbridge comments about Suhrawardī’s “apprehension of Platonic Forms” (2005, p. 202) and that, like Plato, Suhrawardī speaks of three hierarchies of reality, or of existence, the earthly and the spiritual, as well as the zone in between which he terms *‘ālam al-mithāl* (the world of images) or *‘mundus imaginalis*. This is “a world which [has] dimension and extension ... a world where there are cities whose number it is impossible to count” (Corbin, 1984/1995, p. 8). It is in this intermediary world (which appears to correlate to Plato’s *chōra*) that forms and images are able to manifest and be perceived. Suhrawardī locates this place in the ‘eighth climate’, beyond the seven climes or geographies recognised at the time. This eighth climate, “beyond the mountain of Qāf” (beyond the sense-perceptible world) was located in *Nā-kojā-Ābād*, or the “land of No-where” (Corbin, 1990/1998).

2.3. The inner spaces of music

There are numerous accounts of encounters with musical elements in this intermediary zone, mainly in non-European traditions. It appears that the initial stage on this journey is to experience music entering the listener (or performer), that she experiences within herself territory in which music can be hosted, that it can “resonate within” (Clarke and Clarke, 2011, p. 142), that “you become the *rāga*” (p. 145), or maybe, in the words of Kiki Dee (1974), “I’ve got the music in me.”

For others, this is a preparatory step on the way to experiencing the inner spaces of music. Rather than music ‘entering’ the subject (essentially a passive activity), the subject experiences themselves entering the music itself, as if stepping into a room.

With the opening of the *Swara*,¹ the single note, which looked so closed and narrow, becomes spacious. We find that in each note there are directions such as up and down, sides and depths, curves and textures of every kind, from grainy rough surfaces to velveteen and to those that shine like shot silk. There are various facets to each note and even moods. It now becomes a fit vehicle to express the musician’s inner reaches (Menon, 2000, p. 36)

Such accounts appear not to take this entry into the note metaphorically or symbolically, but experientially as spatial phenomenon

¹ *Swara* (Sanskrit, स्वर *svara*: tone or note) exists only when sounded; it is the vibration of a moment in musical time, music on the wing, vibrating through the air.

which has an affective character. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, said “We will experience the tone as an opening that the gods have made from the world of the spirit which lies beyond us into this physical, sensory world” (1906 & 1920-23/1989, p. 94). “We shall climb through the note of the physical-material world into the spiritual world” (1914-1915/1996, p. 104). From a similar period, Mögeline (2015) states that “that you must *connect* yourself more strongly with the single tone, as if to creep inside it” (p. 427).

This account or notion of going into the sound is reminiscent of a passage by Buber in which he talks about his experience of the creativity of speech. He speaks from a zone of interbeing, here paraphrased to reference music instead of words.²

You should make music as if within it the heavens were opened; not as if you were taking music into you, but rather as if you were entering into [the] music. For if someone has really entered into music, it is as if they would create heaven and earth, and all the worlds anew. (1916, p. 238, Trans. and contextualised by author)

From a different discipline, Buber’s account of entering into a space where you “create ... all the worlds anew” resonates in intriguing ways with the creative spaces of Plato’s *chōra*, Suhrawardī’s *mundus imaginalis* and the *éblouissement* (dazzlement) of Messiaen (1978).

2.4. Geography and contemplation

Over the past decade, a small but growing body of literature has emerged which explores the interface between contemplation and geography, particularly the adoption of mindfulness as a research method. Whitehead et al. (2016) began a dialogue between mindfulness and geography, arguing that mindful practice can reshape geographical epistemology and methodology. More recent contributions have extended this work while also acknowledging the need for caution. Asker (2022) maps both the promise and limitations of “mindful methodologies” in geography and later proposes a “mindful geography” as a form of research praxis and alternative orientation within academic work (Asker, 2024). Related developments within health geography locate contemplative practices in ordinary settings, such as the ‘body at home’ as a therapeutic site (Eagar and Kearns, 2022) and reframe “therapeutic landscapes” as part of everyday spatial experience (Edwards, 2022). These works collectively call for trained attention and mindfulness as legitimate areas of geographical inquiry and teaching, while supporting more porous boundaries between disciplines. However, they remain largely within secular, psychosocial and pedagogical domains, rarely extending toward a more expansive ontology that includes supersensible dimensions of perception.

2.5. Self-disclosure, risk and parrhesia

In documenting the kinds of experiences described here, I deliberately deprivatise aspects of my inner life. This sits uneasily within many academic conventions, in which such experiences are typically excluded or regarded as insufficiently objective. It also sits uneasily with me, as my inner life is not something I would normally seek to share publicly.

This discomfort can be understood in relation to Foucault’s notion of parrhesia, or frank speech, in which truth-telling involves a degree of risk (Foucault, 1983). In this instance, the risk is not political but

² *Man soll die Worte sprechen, als seien die Himmel geöffnet in ihnen, und als wäre es nicht so, dass du das Wort in deinen Mund nimmst, sondern als gingest du in das Wort ein. Denn wenn einer in das Wort wirklich eingegangen ist, so ist es, als schiife er Himmel und Erde und alle Welten von neuem.* (1916, p. 238)

One should speak words as if in them the heavens were opened; not as if you were taking words into your mouth, but rather as if you were entering into the word [or Word]. If someone has really entered into the Word, it is as if they would create heaven and earth and all the worlds anew. (Trans. author).

epistemic and reputational, arising from the disclosure of experiences that fall some way outside accepted frameworks of academic inquiry. The account that follows is therefore offered not as rhetorical argument but as a direct description of lived experience. It involves a willingness to articulate what would normally remain unspoken, in the hope that such disclosure might extend the range of what can be considered within academic studies of space.

3. The form of the study

This section outlines the methodological framework through which the study was conceived and enacted. It begins by situating the inquiry within the traditions of contemplative research, before introducing the notion of connoisseurship as a mode of refined perception and interpretive disclosure. Questions of replicability and rigour are then addressed, followed by an account of the research method and the presentation of findings.

3.1. Contemplative inquiry

This study is informed by Arthur Zajonc's (2009) notion of contemplative inquiry as an integration of scientific, artistic and spiritual ways of knowing. Drawing on phenomenology, Goethean science and contemplative traditions, Zajonc proposes that genuine understanding arises when cognition is infused with mindfulness, empathy and sustained attention. Contemplative inquiry involves a movement from observation to participation: rather than standing apart from a phenomenon, the inquirer enters into a relationship of presence and receptivity with it. Through practices such as meditative reflection, the researcher cultivates an inner stillness that gradually can allow new meaning to disclose itself. As I discuss later, this method complements and extends conventional epistemologies, suggesting that knowledge is not only analytic but also experiential and transformative. In doing this, Zajonc positions contemplative inquiry as both a scholarly discipline and a path of self-development, where the refinement of perception and the deepening of insight are inseparable from the transformation of the subject.

In addition to Zajonc's contemplative inquiry, I draw on Foucault's notion of *spirituality* as a methodological stance – “the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth,” a process that “brings the subject's being into play” (Foucault, 1980/2016, p. 15). In this sense, the inquiry becomes a transformative practice enacted through “technologies of the self ... [which] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves”, Foucault's “purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, [and] modifications of existence” mentioned above, and through which the subject is “changed, transformed, shifted, and become[s], to some extent and up to a certain point, other than [themselves]” (1981-1982/2005, p. 15). Foucault saw these as transformative “for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth” (1981-1982/2005, p. 15). It is, essentially, a meditative approach, not following a particular school or method, but involving repeated meditative exercises over an extended period, in my case, several decades. Working in this way makes the subject both the focus and lens of the study. The researcher's inner life becomes the instrument through which phenomena are perceived and interpreted. The more refined and focused the lens, the more accurate it is.

3.1.1. Connoisseurship and the disclosure of inner experience

This approach resonates with Elliot Eisner's concept of *connoisseurship* (2002), a refined ability to perceive and appreciate

subtle qualitative distinctions in experience, an appreciation of emotional, aesthetic and affective nuance which has been cultivated over time. This involves an awareness that moves beyond description or surface-level appreciation toward the felt texture of phenomena, toward intuitively perceived experience, and comes about through repeated, informed engagement. In experiential spirituality, this becomes a spiritual connoisseurship: a disciplined capacity to discern and interpret the intangible, complex matrix of spiritual experience.

When the connoisseur decides to speak publicly, he becomes a critic.

If connoisseurship is the art of appreciation, criticism is the art of disclosure. ... What the critic strives for is to articulate or render those ineffable qualities constituting art in a language that makes them vivid. But this gives rise to something of a paradox. How is it that what is ineffable can be articulated? How can words express what words can never express? The task of the critic is to adumbrate, suggest, imply, connote, render, rather than to attempt to translate. In this task, metaphor and analogy, suggestion and implication are major tools. ... The task of the critic is to help us to see. (Eisner, 1976, p. 141)

I strive here to move from the private domain of the connoisseur to that of the critic, and to try to articulate the ineffable inner experience of a musical interval. Connoisseurship provides a supplementary methodological lens to view aesthetic and spiritual insight as rigorous forms of knowledge production.

3.1.2. Replicability

Contemplative inquiry is not an off-the-shelf method which can be applied without preparation, perhaps significant preparation. It is dependent on the receptivity and being of the researcher – essentially, how well refined the lens is which they bring to the study. However, I agree with Godwin (2007) when he says that

It answers to the requirements of a scientific method, namely that anyone with the right equipment will discover its objective existence. However, unlike the radio telescope or particle collider, which inform the scientist of invisible and almost unimaginable realities, the exploration of [the spiritual world] requires the special tool of a highly refined astral³ or spiritual body: something as rare and hard to obtain as any piece of expensive hardware. (pp. 6–7)

The comparison with scientific instrumentation here is only partial. While this does not yield identical or directly comparable experiences, it allows for the cultivation of modes of perception within which similar structures may be recognised, even when expressed in very different terms. As Godwin goes on to suggest, such inquiry depends on obtaining or developing the right instrument. I recognise that I hold within me a number of unusual attributes – a musical training, absolute pitch,⁴ a decades-long meditative practice – but these are not unique to me. When asked how long it took to develop intuitive capacities (Godwin's highly refined astral body), Rudolf Steiner replied, “Seven years, perhaps seven times seven years, perhaps seven lifetimes, perhaps only 7 hours – it depends entirely on what a person brings with them” (1905-1906/1983, p. 226).

It is understandable why such capacities might be regarded as inaccessible or suspect if one cannot personally replicate them straight

³ The astral body is understood across esoteric traditions as a supersensible aspect of the human being linking the senses, emotions and awareness of non-physical realms.

⁴ For as long as I can remember, I have ‘known’ what notes I am listening to, whether these sound in the air or in my head, in a similar way to how most people know what colours they are looking at. This facility is known as perfect or absolute pitch and is estimated to affect around 1:10,000 of the population; the incidence of it is concentrated more strongly in trained musicians (Deutsch, 2006).

away and without dedicated effort. However, this overlooks the sustained commitment needed to work in this way, as well as manifold ways in which people perceive and experience the world. As Wilber says,

The mystics ask you to take nothing on mere belief. Rather they give you a set of experiments to test in your own awareness and experience. The laboratory is your own mind; the experiment is meditation. You yourself try it and compare your test results with others who have also performed the experiment. (1991, p. 82)

Whether this takes seven years, seven lifetimes or 7 hours, it requires active engagement on the part of the researcher which will “bring his very being into play” and leave him other than he was before (Foucault, 1981-1982/2005). This is a big ask for a researcher.

However, just as not everyone has access to a particle collider, yet the validity of the research it enables is not questioned, the same principle can be applied here. Both scientific and spiritual inquiry seek to make the unseen perceptible, although by different means. Each requires the right equipment, disciplined training, careful verification and an openness to realities that lie beyond ordinary sense perception. The distinction lies not in rigour but in the kind of instrument, be it material or spiritual, through which the inquiry is approached.

3.1.3. Method and location

What follows is a short extract from a meditation journal I have kept for many years. It takes the form of a lengthy Word document, with each entry dated. The large majority of entries were written immediately after individual meditation sessions. The extracts selected describe recurring experiences across multiple sessions, rather than isolated or exceptional ones, and are intended to document relatively stable patterns within them. They were chosen because they refer to spatial experiences of the fifth. Most have been shared before (Boland, 2019) in the context of compositional approaches for creating small pieces of music for children, however, on that occasion, the spatial nature of the experiences was not discussed in any depth. I hope to rectify this here.

The initial stage of the inquiry is to enter the place of “great stillness” (Lao-tzu, 2009, p. 15). This is more than just a feeling of calm or being mindful, it is the first stage of an extended consciousness which has been described variously in multiple inner traditions such as “a lamp in a windless place” or “void of abstract fullness” (Shear, 2014, pp. 59–60). Steiner describes it as when,

passing from the noise and tumult of the world, we can enter complete silence, as it were, ‘zero’. But then we can go further still ... below this zero point ... [into] a negative quiet, negative tranquillity that is deeper than tranquillity. (1923/2020, p. 14)

On entering this space (see Boland, 2024), the everyday sense impressions of eyes and ears fall away; one becomes as if blind and deaf to the world. Achieving this level of consciousness is experienced as entering a space which is silent and devoid of impression, barring the experience of vastness and utter darkness. Shear describes it as being “a disembodied observer in the midst of vast emptiness” (2014, p. 61), for Steiner, it is the initial step of crossing the abyss, stepping over the threshold from the material into the spiritual world (2017/2017).

I experience it as arriving at a vast, dark, silent plain on which nothing at all can be perceived, “Darkness in all directions./Silence in all directions./Void, reflecting nothing” (2024, p. 58). I cannot see its vastness, yet I know it to be endless. It is interesting as nothing can be ‘seen’ and it could essentially be like being in a small cupboard, yet the strong feeling is of vast unbroken space. It is a calm, neutral inner space which asks and demands nothing; I experience it as infinitely full of potential, expectant yet empty at the same time (Boland, 2024). Once

this landscape has been attained, I take up in my mind what it is which I want to explore, and ‘add’ it to this lightless, still, void space. It can be a concept, a geometrical form, a tone or interval as here, a person or a phrase. After a short or a long time,⁵ this “emptiness empties itself of emptiness” (Wilber, 1999, July 31) and the space transforms in an instant. In the example I document here, I concentrate on the spatial aspects of the experience of a fifth, although it would be possible to connect it to much else besides.

3.1.4. The interval of a fifth

While I discuss what is known within Western musical traditions as a perfect fifth – the interval produced by two notes in the ratio of 3:2 – the same dyad (two notes) is central across numerous musical and philosophical systems worldwide (Ho et al., 2018). In ancient China, the principle of *sanfen sunyi* (三分損益, “subtract and add one-third”) method successively adjusted the lengths of pitch-pipes to produce new tones, each a fifth higher or a fourth lower than the previous one, thereby generating the complete series of twelve pitches (Service, n.d.) which formed the basis of Chinese *lǜ* (律) theory. In South Asia, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Ghosh, 1950, chapter 28) identifies the relation between *Sa* (tonic) and *Pa* (fifth) as *sāmvādi*, a consonance based on the ration of 3:2, which embodies both aesthetic and cosmological balance (Stephens, 2017). Medieval Islamic theorists such as al-Fārābī in *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-kabīr* (Erlanger, 1930) and Šafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī in *Kitāb al-Adwār* (Wright, 1978) both describe the fifth as a primary consonance defined by the 3:2 ratio, fundamental to the structure of modes and harmony. Across these non-Western contexts, the fifth functions not only as an acoustic constant but as a symbolic expression of harmonic order, linking sound, mathematics and the spiritual nature of perception.⁶

4. Working with(in) a fifth

The instance I discuss here is my interaction with the musical interval of a fifth, using the approach outlined above. It was part of a progressive series of experiments when writing a series of small pieces of music for children (see Boland, 2019). In my journal, I documented how I perceived and engaged with this imagined fifth and, in what follows, I present selected extracts from that journal and discuss them in relation to my experience. It becomes clear that my reactions are multi-sensory, responding to what I ‘heard’ while writing from a location where sound, shape, space, feeling and motion converge. In the instance discussed here, I was thinking of the fifth D–A, specifically, the D below middle C (D3) and the A above it (A3). This register lies in the middle of my vocal range; performing the same experiment one or two octaves higher and lower alters the qualitative character of the interval, becoming more tense or indistinct.

I first achieved Lao-Tzu’s “great stillness” or what Steiner has called “an expectant mood in peacefulness of soul” (1914/2008, p. 9). I was no longer aware of outer sense impressions and experienced myself within the calm silence of the vast empty space around me, before I (mentally) added a sounding fifth (D and the A above it) to this darkness. As I wrote, I

⁵ There is no predictability of the outcome of any meditative session. Each one is unique and there is never a guarantee of what will happen, or if anything will happen at all.

⁶ There is a wider literature on the perfect fifth (the exact 3:2 relationship) beyond the South Asian, Chinese, and Islamic sources mentioned above. Additional examples include early Greek Pythagorean tuning and Euclid’s *Sectio canonis* which indicate that scales were built of stacked fifths (Barbara, 1991); Byzantine chant theorists (e.g. Chrysanthos of Madytos, 1832/2010) retain the fifth as a primary consonance in the structure of modes and scales. Mesopotamian tuning tablets are widely understood to encode cycles of fifths (Wulstan, 1968); and the Korean *aak* (아악, the Confucian ritual or ceremonial music of Korea) inherits China’s *sanfen sunyi* method of generating fifths mentioned above (Provine, 1974).

[c]oncentrated on the A [the higher note] while keeping both notes in my mind. I experienced the fifth as flat, with some depth below but mainly upper surface. I could look down on it from an angle. It did not move but, the more I regarded it, it slightly pulsed over a period of several seconds. After watching it at a small distance for a while, I tried and was able to descend towards it; when I did this, it dipped down to receive me like a sheet of rubber, but I did not make contact as such. I could be near but not in. There was some resistance/reluctance; as I moved towards it, it moved away.

After being 'above' the rubber-like sheet of the interval for a while and able to move myself around it, I tested it a few more times to see if I could actually make contact with it (rather than get near and feel it move away from me).

... [A]ll of a sudden I found myself within the flatness of the fifth. ... The D I experience as somewhere 'below' me and the A is somewhere over my head. Most unusually, I am slowly being rotated head over heels, as if doing a slow-motion forward roll. The A wants me to move till I am horizontal, head slightly lower than the rest of me—it is a little disorientating. I don't do a full somersault, just head below the horizontal a bit.

At this point I (mentally) added some text which I wanted to set to the music (see Boland, 2019, pp. 152–156). Adding the text caused a change of experience, with the first word of each line causing me to rotate forwards and the rest of the line righting me again. I wrote at the time:

The note A of *whakapai*⁷ starts me off upright then tilts me forwards till I lose my uprightness. It is a strange sensation. It feels like something inside me, in my core, is moving rather than I am being moved from outside.

When I had finished the piece to my satisfaction in my head, I started thinking of ways to move gradually from sounded music to silence through a gradual simplification (and lessening) of the music sung or played.

When I work with the repetitions of the idea—gradually fading to nothing—I find I want four repetitions of the word *whakapai*, and nothing else. When I only think *whakapai* (without the rest of the line), I am tilted strongly backwards, not as far as the horizontal plane, before being righted when I stop thinking the word/note. This happens every time I think the line.

Some weeks after this session, I experimented again with the fifth to see if I could extend my perception of it, both 'visually' (the word is approximate as I was not using my eyes) as well as spatially.

When I am 'outside' the fifth, I see it as a rounded form, almost two dimensional as if suspended within the darkness. The space has "emptie[d] itself of emptiness" yet I still find myself on the vast, dark plane. The interesting thing is that I am now joined by the fifth, as it were a short distance away. As soon as I fall 'into' the interval, I move in a moment from the still darkness into constantly moving or weaving light, a light-filled space which is never still, and I am myself also moving within the space. The change happens in a moment – there is no feeling of transition. One moment I am outside, the next I am inside. It happens as fast as a bubble bursting. Being within the fifth I feel enclosed, a feeling of being a smooth, light-filled, space in which I, as well as everything else, am in movement.

Below, I discuss some aspects of these experiences.

4.1. Discussion

4.1.1. Exploring inner space

I have chosen this example as it shows how interior space can be experienced as a location, a place, a landscape which one can engage with and navigate, and which is experienced dimensionally, albeit in ways which are suited to this non-physical territory. It shows that there are multiple ways of experiencing the world spatially, not all of them commonly expressed.

I am reminded of Foucault's (1980/1991) concept of *eventalisation*, which stresses the importance of noting "singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a ... constant" (p. 76). Spatial experiences (here, of music) are not necessarily as they are commonly taken to be. When revisited, this event shows a second level of interiority, experiencing the interiority of an interval within my own interiority. It represents an unfolding of layered, lived encounters with space (Merleau-Ponty, 2013/2013), a phenomenological progression. Beginning in stillness, opening into an apparent void, free of impressions, within which the fifth is later 'seen' as an isolated form, and finally entering into a participatory relation in which the interval is experienced from within itself. The method by which I achieved this – the concentration on a single object until everything else was stilled and faded into the background – resembles a standard and accepted meditative technique for achieving higher meditative states or *Samādhi* (Biswas, 2011; Clarke and Kini, 2011).

Standard Western musicological thought (see, for example, McAuley et al., 2021) does not have a lot (if anything) to say about experiences like this, although, among themselves, musicians sometimes talk about them. Analytical and regulative musicologies (Mikkonen, 2004) have long since displaced speculative⁸ musical traditions in the West which had dominated musical thought until the 17th century (Godwin, 1982). This is not the case however in Hindustani (North Indian) musicology which, in particular, has much to say about the interiority of music.

Equally significant is the affective character of these spaces. The darkened void is experienced not as threatening, lonely or isolated, but rather as calm, brimming with latent possibility and characterised by profound equanimity. Its atmosphere is one of potentiality rather than lack. Likewise, the movement towards and eventual entry into the interval involves a subtle attraction, curiosity and participation. The transition from the still darkness to the moving, light-filled interior of the fifth is accompanied by a corresponding shift in emotional tone. Space and emotion always appear intertwined; such spaces are not just observed but are disclosed through their affective qualities.

The initial stage of the experience I document involves the sensation of vast space, the 'empty', dark plain. Shear notes that "there is widespread agreement that an internal level completely devoid of phenomenal content lies at the ground of everyone's awareness, and can be experienced and remembered" (2014, p. 60). While Wabbeh et al. (2018) identifies this as "the endpoint of the transcending process; an undirected consciousness, silent and awake within itself" (p. 20), others see it as the first of several levels of extended consciousness beyond the everyday, of being "aware of the vast empty phenomenological space surrounding in all directions" (Shear, 2014, p. 59), experiencing an "absorption into a void which has 'nothingness' as its object. Finally ... there evolves neither perception, nor nonperception" (Austin, 1998, p. 474, from the Zen Buddhist tradition), where "one's mind has become indivisible with space" (Wallace, 1999, p. 182, from Tibetan tradition). I strongly agree that the experience of the darkened void is not an end point, but is, instead, the initial stage from which further levels of awareness (if levels is the right word) can be experienced.

After a period in this space (I have found that time is impossible to gauge in such situations), I enter a second stage in which I 'see' the

⁷ 'Blessing' in te reo Māori, the Indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁸ "Looking at the cosmos musically, and at music cosmically" (Godwin, 1982, p. 373).

interval as if in front of me, although still on the dark plane. What I find of interest here is that the intervallic ‘shape’ appears by itself within this darkened space, and that find I am able to move towards it as I would walk across a field to look at a tree. This is curious as it suggests that the experience of direction remains familiar and consistent, even when awareness of the everyday has fallen away. Halák (2021) argues that it appears that the body retains a schema of its orientation in the world even when the everyday world is no longer being experienced (as in dreams, for instance). In this sense, and drawing on Merleau-Ponty, the “void” is not an absence of space but a situated spatial field in which the body’s schema continues to orient as usual.

Regardless, this object has size, shape, dimension, and distance from me; it allows me to ‘approach’ it but also move around it, as if to observe it from different angles. In addition, it has behaviour: (very) slowly pulsating. It appears much larger than I am in this space, although any sense of relativity is uncertain, for I am totally unclear how ‘large’ I am in this dimension. As I move myself in relationship to the fifth, I am unhindered by any notion of gravity – I can move ‘up’ and ‘down’ as easily as in any other direction. When I approach and try to engage with it at an angle as if from above, it shows initial reluctance and moves away, while retaining its form. I wrote of it appearing like a rubber sheet (although, unlike a rubber sheet, I did not have the sensation of actually coming in to contact with it). It moved away as I approached and remained out of touch. Perhaps the best analogy is that it behaved like a magnet when repelled by another of the same polarity.

The important moment for me is that of ‘falling’ into the interval which occurred without preparation and was unexpected. At that point my experience changed fundamentally; within this space, I experienced the two tones which made up the interval ‘above’ and ‘below’ me. My equilibrium was also affected as was rotated within the space in reaction to the (inwardly created) sound. To date, I have not come across a detailed, first-person account anywhere in literature of the inner experience, inner space or landscape of an interval. There are however multiple accounts of the inner space, inner perception of a note within Hindustani musicology which may be comparable.

The term *swara*⁹ is commonly translated as ‘note’. However, in Western musicology, the word ‘note’ can also refer to something abstract. For instance, the note A is (most commonly) taken to be 440 Hz (440 vibrations per second), whereas *swara* exists only when sounded. It is “the vibration of an embodied moment” (Biswas, 2011, p. 100), music as it is being created, alive, vibrating through the air and making things vibrate in sympathy with it. Menon (2001) talks about the etymological roots of the word *swara* as meaning “the radiance of the inner self” (p. 100).

Indian musicians speak specifically about the interiority of the *swara*, “the subtle level of the space within each note” (Clarke and Kini, 2011, pp. 143–144). As mentioned in the literature review section, Menon comments,

With the opening of the *Swara*, the single note, which looked so closed and narrow, becomes spacious. We find that in each note there are directions such as up and down, sides and depths, curves and textures of every kind, from grainy rough surfaces to velveteen and to those that shine like shot silk. There are various facets to each note and even moods. It now becomes a fit vehicle to express the musician’s inner reaches. (2000, p. 36)

My experiences with the fifth, and with other notes and intervals not mentioned here, support Menon’s assertions that there are indeed directions such as up and down, sides, curves, textures and so on within a single note, and, above all, movement. This suggests that inner space may be as vast and as little explored as outer space. Indications like this are not limited to Asia. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Rudolf Steiner commented to an associate, Paul Baumann, “I believe

that there is a clearly discernible tendency today ... to enter more deeply into the tone itself” (1906 & 1920-23/1989, p. 48). He compared a tone/note to be an opening from the physical world into the world of the spirit, which we can “climb through” (Steiner, 1914-1915/1996, p. 104). Precisely what he meant by this is not expanded on. Eftestøl comments that “The tone is for Steiner a spiritual being which can be encountered, but that requires that one enters into its depth, that one ‘goes deeper into it’ as he says.” (2019). Eftestøl also refers to the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988) in this context. Scelsi wrote, “When one enters a tone, it surrounds you. One becomes a part of this tone ... Everything is inside, already in this tone is the whole cosmos which fills space” (Eftestøl, 2019).

There is a gap in the literature concerning if or how the ‘space’ within an interval differs from that of a single tone. However, the notion that one can go ‘into’ a musical sound, “climb through [it] into the spiritual world”, that music is not just audible but also contains spatial dimensions which allow entry into it is borne out by my experiences.

A significant and important way in which my experience differs from the above accounts however is that the interval I responded to was heard in outer silence. Unlike *swara*, it was not sounded in the air, it was not music ‘on the wing’ but was sounded completely internally, to the exclusion of all else within my interior space. Hindustani musicology also has an extensive literature around unsounded sound, *anāhata*.¹⁰

The soundless sound is something real, absolutely real Silence is the source of everything. It is the source of music and it is music itself. Silence is the deepest, most satisfying music of the Supreme Silence is the nest and music is the bird. The bird leaves the nest early in the morning and returns to the nest in the evening. Similarly, in the spiritual world, divine music comes from the inmost soul of silence. (Chinnmoy, 1995, p.12 and p.3)

“Anāhata is also the name of the heart chakra, and it is through this vortex of energy that such internal music can be found” (Hanser, 2016, p. 58). Saraswati (2007) similarly talks of a “divine energy” situated in the region of the heart.

The original form of this sense-perceived universe is primal energy ... This vibration is called *nada* or *nadam*, cosmic music. Plato called it the music of the spheres, the music of nature. It is known as ... *ahāhata nāda* and OM. It is the voice of silence. (p. 7)

It is beyond the scope of this article to document the spatial phenomena of silence, or the experience of stepping beyond this silence to explore the dimensions of the music which fills it.

4.1.2. When tone becomes space: A compositional transformation

This experiment formed part of a broader sequence investigating how meditative states of consciousness might shape the composition of short pieces of music for pre-school children (Boland, 2019). The process began by writing in a state of ordinary awareness, arranging notes according to what sounded aesthetically effective and was appropriate to the words chosen – a straightforward task given my background and training and which took little time. From there, I moved through phases that drew increasingly on imagination: envisioning the music as moving through a landscape, pulsating within stilled bodies of water, or following melodic lines as they travelled before me in three dimensions. These explorations gradually led me to wonder if it was possible to compose within the meditative process itself, something I had never considered previously. Composition and meditative practice were active but quite separate parts of my life. Ideas of space or spatiality were not on my research agenda.

As I began to work using meditation as a research method, of considering compositions while in extended levels of meditative

⁹ Sanskrit: *swara* (स्वर) means sound, tone or a musical note.

¹⁰ Sanskrit: *anāhata* Anāhata, lit., unstruck sound, as opposed to *ahata* or audible sound.

consciousness, composition became less deliberate and increasingly intuitive, rapidly taking on a participatory quality. I experienced this as an immense relief. It allowed me to join two essential aspects of my life which I had previously kept apart. This transformation was as much emotional as it was methodological. What had previously felt constrained by convention and habit became participatory, welcoming and alive, altering both my relationship with music and my experience of the interior spaces through which the compositions emerged.

The instance described here marked the first moment when music no longer appeared as something external to the compositional process (for example, as the shape and behaviour of tones, intervals or melodic lines perceived meditatively in space but as ‘outside’ me still), but as a space I could inhabit and experience from within. It represents a transformative moment in my compositional practice and in my understanding of what music is. From this point, I was able to remove self-imposed constrictions on my ideas on how I was ‘meant’ to write music (essentially, how I had been taught or had picked up by following convention) but was free to explore the extended levels of conscious possible in meditation, allowing my compositional process to be led by the experiences of meditative awareness, experimenting with new approaches and documenting the results.

This particular project has ended, yet I continue to explore how interior space can be experienced, and how this relates to the experiencing of and writing of music.

4.1.3. Experience of the interiority of space as transformational agent

An important feature of these spatial experiences of interiority is that they are transformative in the sense that there is a before and after; it is hard to imagine the researcher being unaltered by the encounter. In a lecture at the *Collège de France* in 1982, Foucault spoke about the different demands of philosophy and spirituality.

[T]he philosopher ... can recognise the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through this activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject. (1981-1982/2005, p. 7)

This is, I believe, the standard approach of the Western academy.¹¹ Whereas with spirituality

the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call ‘spirituality’ then the set of these researches, practices and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth. ... [In] spirituality, there can be no truth without a conversion or transformation of the subject. (1981-2/2005, p. 15)

This statement resonates with my understanding of the process and experiences I have attempted to outline. In working over time with what Foucault here calls “ascetic exercises ... conversions of looking and modifications of existence”, the subject becomes “changed, transformed, and ... other than himself.” Leading perhaps to “The truth [being] given to the subject at [the] price [of] the subject’s being.” This is, by its very nature, transformational (Chirico et al., 2022; Gabriellson et al., 2018). The example I have given here is one of a series of experiential phenomena which form a gradual unfolding alethurgy of insight into musical space.

Sparby and Sacchet (2025) seek to develop a unified model or map of advanced meditation, human development and meditation experiences and stages of insight across traditions to connect disparate sources and understand ways in which the experiences of advanced meditative

practice have been documented over significant periods of time. They write that advanced concentrative absorption meditation is a “fundamental human capacity” (see also Maslow, 1971) which leads to experiences which can range from “extreme focus, bliss, happiness, profound peace, to *pure space*, consciousness, and forms of liminal, transformative, and fundamental awareness” (p. 2477, italics added). What ‘pure space’ is in this context is not expanded on and remains an avenue of future inquiry.

In synthesising maps of stages of insight from different times and cultures, they speak of “an encounter with ‘the void’ behind phenomena” (p. 2478), familiar from the account given above, which they term “a cessation, or *nirodha*¹² which means complete unconsciousness for typically a short period of time, though such cessations may last for hours or even days (Laukkonen et al., 2023).” They state elsewhere

The intentional control exhibited by advanced meditators may be both rare and dependent on certain kinds of practices aiming specifically at developing such control. However, such meditators are increasingly taking part in contributing to science by making their experience and skills available to scientific scrutiny. (p. 2474)

It was from this parrhesiastic gesture that, several years ago, I first began to explore ways of making aspects of my meditative life public, guided by the conviction that one of the most important values for any academic is openness or, more precisely, intellectual honesty. Yet rather than offering myself up for scrutiny, I consider it essential that those who work in these ways are able to be heard directly, in their own words and on their own terms. It is in this spirit that I have written this article.

5. Limitations, next steps

I have described a small experience of interior space. The limitations of this description indicate what next steps might be. Restrictions of length have precluded extensive connections to be made to inner traditions and accounts of similar experiences, connections to spatial experiences not involving music, including the possibility of exploring analogous spatial phenomena in relation to abstract or geometric forms.¹³ They have also limited the opportunity for extended musing as to ‘where’ such experiences might be located, and connections made to the work of generations of philosophers, religious figures, musicians and academics.

Future research possibilities include an extended and fuller setting out of methodology and method, including linking it widely to other authors, traditions and accounts. These include rich accounts from Western, Islamic, Andean and Asian traditions. Such meaningful connections to the work of others would help give context to the exploratory and experiential method which I strive to develop. While the primary focus of this article has been spatiality, the experiences described here are also characterised by distinctive affective qualities. Feelings of curiosity, bliss and profound peace are closely interwoven with the perception of interior space. This is consistent with Sparby and Sacchet’s observation that advanced contemplative states are often accompanied by experiences of “bliss, happiness, and profound peace” (2025, p. 2472), which they liken to states of *nirvana*. A fuller examination of the relationship between emotion and interior spatiality must wait for some other occasion.

A further intriguing and significant area of inquiry which attracts me is exploring the spatial phenomena which exist within silence, the dimensions and location of *anāhata*, unsounded sound, the music – and attendant emotional qualities – which exist on the far side of silence.

¹¹ I readily acknowledge that there is no monolithic or essentialist West (see Appiah, 2018), and that academics who work in universities and scholarly institutions hold diverse perspectives rather than a unified viewpoint.

¹² *Nirodha* in Pali, *nirvana* in Sanskrit.

¹³ For example, a triangle, square, cube or tetrahedron.

6. Conclusion

This exploration began with Merleau-Ponty's insight that perception is not the passive reception of an external world but an embodied participation in spatial phenomena. The study has shown that this participation extends beyond the limits of sensory experience. What begins as physical spatiality crosses a threshold into what might be called supersensible space, still structured by direction and relation but no longer dependent on sense impressions. Rather than opposing inner and outer, this suggests a continuum of spatial experience, a single field within which awareness and world interpenetrate at different levels or dimensions.

Such a view reframes space as a living medium of consciousness and questions the assumption that spatial experience is confined to the visible or material. In the compositional experiments described here, sound itself becomes spatial: tones and intervals emerge as mobile forms inhabiting an interior field that was nonetheless experienced as real. This continuity between bodily and liminal spatiality offers a way to think beyond the Cartesian divide that still shapes much of contemporary thought. It proposes that the experience of space is not only representational but generative, an event in which perception, movement and meaning continually co-emerge.

I strongly believe that the creation of new knowledge and the expansion of the boundaries of what can be known lie at the heart of academic work. Yet this can involve stepping onto unfamiliar and untested ground. As Zajonc says:

New experience must be joined with new thinking if new knowledge is to result. New insight requires new concepts as well as new percepts. We require a way of bringing experience and reason together, a way of perceiving meaning in the given, even when the given arises through deep meditation. (2009, p. 179)

This epistemic stance carries implications for the academy itself. Contemporary disciplines have largely partitioned the study of space, consciousness and art into separate silos, each simultaneously supported and constrained by its own epistemic conventions. Yet to understand the multiplicity of ways in which space is lived, highlighting its *eventalisation*, how it can be physical, affective and supersensible at once, requires more porous borders between disciplines. My own academic journey from musicology to education studies, has made me aware of how those in different disciplines have their own onto-epistemologies which are often unquestioned and seldom debated. It has also shown me the necessity and value of working across these apparent borders. If our academic and research cultures could further promote such crossings, might the study of space be able to expand to contain the whole range of human experience? From the material to the ineffable, from the geographies of place to the geographies of consciousness?

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Microsoft Co-Pilot for language editing, review of manuscript revisions and refining responses to editorial feedback. The author reviewed and edited the output as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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